

# **Caste, Craft and Traditional Knowledge in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

*Arts and crafts of drummer caste (Nakati), mat weaver caste (Kinnara) and smith caste (Navandanna) play a significant role in Traditional Cultural Expressions in Sinhala society in the forms of dance, art, temple paintings and rituals of various kinds. However, these are encountering multiple problems due to external threats such as globalisation, cultural homogenisation and increased competition from mass production of artifacts on the one hand and internal problems such as younger generations moving away from these crafts primarily due to status considerations on the other. In spite of these difficulties, some of the traditional crafts such as pottery, brass work and wood carving have achieved a degree of momentum and revival due to tourism and state patronage. Similarly, some of the traditional art forms have achieved a new lease of life due to electronic media, political patronage and integration with educational and training programmes. This in turn calls for a systematic assessment of the determinants of preservation and conservation of traditional knowledge systems in Sri Lanka.*

*This paper examines the role of the caste structure in the inhibition of the preservation/conservation of traditional knowledge systems and the role of tourism, globalization, electronic/print media and state policies in the promotion/preservation of such knowledge and cultural expressions.*

*It argues for a policy framework that is equally sensitive to cultural dynamics of the craft communities and, at the same time, opportunities and openings offered by the market forces and globalisation.*

## **Introduction**

A good deal of traditional knowledge in Sri Lankan society rests with the lowest castes in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. A bulk of the traditional knowledge relating to pottery, cane craft, Dumbara mat weaving, making of different types of drums, jewellery making, brass work, stonework, making of whisks, astrology and occult practices continue to be possessed by respective caste groups which are typically at the lower end of the caste hierarchy (Ryan 1993: 96-137).

Similarly arts and crafts of drummer caste (*Nakati*), mat weaver caste (*Kinnara*) and smith caste (*Navandanna*) play a significant role in Traditional Cultural Expressions in Sinhala society in the forms of dance, art, temple paintings and various rituals (Coomaraswami 1908, Ariyapala 1956: 291).

Using findings of a SAARC Cultural Centre funded research project on Arts, Crafts and Identity and Cultural Dynamics of three depressed caste groups in the Sinhala society, Sri Lanka, namely *Nakathi*, *Kinnara* and *Rodiya*, this paper examines the following issues.

- How far has the historically low caste status of the relevant bearers of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions inhibited the preservation and conservation of the relevant knowledge systems.
- The role of tourism, international travel and globalisation in the promotion of some of the traditional art forms.
- The role of education in popularisation of some of the art forms.
- The role of electronic and printed media in the dissemination of relevant knowledge systems.
- The role of state policies and programmes in relation to preservation and conservation of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

The villages covered in this study were Weldambala, Kalapuraya and Menikhinna. Subsequently the study was extended to three *Rodiya* villages in the Kurunegala district, namely Manawa, Kurulupaluwa and Waduressa.

### **Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions in the Selected Castes**

Each of the three caste groups covered by this study had some traditional knowledge which they considered as their distinctive cultural heritage. This included orally transmitted knowledge relating to crafts, rituals, myths of origin and magical and occult practices. They also possessed some traditional cultural expressions that have achieved an iconic significance for identifying and displaying the Sinhala or even Sri Lankan culture. This section describes these traditional knowledge and cultural expressions in each of the three castes.

### ***Nakati* Caste**

In the Kandyan areas this caste controlled a good deal of the hereditary knowledge in astrology, handloom weaving incorporating Dumbara motifs in some remote villages in the Dumbara valley, planetary rituals (*bali*), drumming and dancing and rituals such as *kohombakankariya* and *suvisi vivarana*. Many of their arts, Kandyan dance and drumming in particular, have emerged as traditional cultural expressions in annual pageants such as Kandy Asala Perahera, political rituals, weddings and tourist shows.

The term ‘Kandyan dance’ itself has been coined as a colonial construct used for mapping of local cultures in characterising Kandyan social formation and Sri Lankan culture in a broader sense. A dance form that began as a ritual act performed by drummers and dancers representing a particular caste (*Berava/Nakati*) in Sinhala society became identified as a distinctive marker of Sinhala Buddhist culture during the nationalist upsurge from the nineteenth century onwards. The value of Kandyan dance from the angle of cultural heritage has been highlighted in a number of writings on art and culture (See Sederaman 1968, Makulloluwa 1976). There are references to Kandyan dance in important anthropological works on Sri Lanka such as Precept and Practice by Richard Gombrich (1971), Rituals of the Kandyan State by H.L. Seneviratne (1978), and The Cult of Goddess Pattini by Gananath Obeyesekere (1984). Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual and Politics in Sri Lanka by Susan A. Reed (2010) can be seen as the first full scale ethnographic and historical account of Kandyan dance.

Traditionally, young people were trained in drumming and dancing through the pupillary succession system. Since 1950s, a more formal system of *kalayathana* (art schools) was established in many of the drummer caste villages under the leadership of well known drummers and dancers who belonged to different dance lineages (*gurukulas*). There were specific dance lineages in different drummer caste villages with a body of knowledge jealously guarded as part of their heritage. These art schools were registered and sponsored by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs giving them a degree of official recognition. Both boys and girls were trained in these schools with *Ves Banduma* marking the initiation of a Kandyan dancer that marks the commencement of their career as a professional dancer.

Describing *Kohomba Kankariya* as the bedrock of Kandyan dance Reed made the following remarks.

Dancing is so central to the kankariya that yakkessa- who also recite texts, sing and perform dramas in the ritual typically speak of their performance as “dancing a kankariya” (Kankariyak natanava). The success of kankariya is judged largely by the aesthetic quality of the performance of dancers as well as drummers. Since the goal of kankariya is to please the gods and human audience, performers try to dance beautifully. (Reed 2010: 35)

Kandyan aristocracy has been the traditional patrons of Kandyan dance. Among other things they sponsored are rituals such as *kohomba kankariya* and *suvisi vivarana*. They themselves had considerable knowledge about Kandyan dance and some of them actually learned and practiced Kandyan dance (Reed 2010: 84). In the colonial era, Kandyan dance became a traditional cultural expression as some Kandy aristocrats deployed Kandyan dance as a means to express the Kandyan cultural identity to British colonial masters and visiting dignitaries. Dance tours to Europe were also arranged for some of the leading Kandyan dancers and drummers in the colonial period. The significance of Kandyan dance as a signifier of Sinhala culture was enhanced due to the emergence of the Sinhala Buddhist identity as a basis of national identity in the post-1956 era.

As evident from Weldambala, several factors have contributed to the preservation of Kandyan dance as an art form.

1. The continuation of Kandy Perahera as an annual cultural pageantry. Many performers still find it important to participate in the Perahera as an aspect of their cultural heritage.
2. Introduction of Kandyan dance to the curriculum in state schools, institutes of aesthetic studies and the universities since 1950s. This has opened up this profession beyond the limits of the caste but some members of Dance lineages have also benefitted from opening up of opportunities for teaching positions in these government institutions.

In the 1940s and 1950s, many of the Impoverished *berava* dancers have eagerly embraced their new found status as prime bearers of Sinhala culture. For many of these dancers, becoming a teacher in a public school .... was an enormous boost for their esteem and status. (Reed 2010: 156)

3. Growth of tourism has had a beneficial effect on popularisation of Kandyan dance as Kandyan dance shows have become a common sight in tourist hotels and special tourist shows organised by particular tour organizers.
4. There are also some new developments such as development of circus troops from among members of the drummer caste families in villages such as Weldambala. One such instance is the rise of Pinah the Redcoud as an acrobat who developed his skills in traditional acrobatics (*pinum*) learned through Kandyan dance.
5. State patronage for staging some politically important rituals such as *Kohomba kankariya* and other performances in television channels.

There are, however, many challenges for Kandyan dance as an embodiment of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions in the modern era.

1. Many of the sons of the ritual performers do not wish to continue their fathers' occupation due to indignities associated with the caste idiom in which Kandyan dancers perform. For instance after the death of the famous Kandyan dancer Gunaya his son is supposed to have destroyed all evidence of his father's profession, even burning in an act of desecration, the most prized possession, the sacred *ves* headdress, that had been conferred on Gunaya at his initiation ceremony (Reed 2010: 151).
2. Appropriation of Kandyan dance by elite performers in Colombo in ways that serve as a barrier for the advancement of traditional practitioners.
3. The increased role of cultural brokers in organising dance shows, dance tours and dance performances for tourists.
4. There is no continuous support for maintaining *kalayathana* in the villages and young people or their families are not willing to pay for this training due to their limited resources and negative attitudes towards children learning the relevant skills and acquiring the relevant knowledge.

As a consequence many of the remaining performers in the villages belong to the older generation who tends to identify such knowledge and skills as part of their distinctive cultural heritage.

## **Rodiya Caste**

The traditional knowledge of *Rodiya* caste comes under four categories.

1. Folklore relating to the origin of *Rodiya* caste, mainly the Ratnavali story. This is in the form of folklore and folk songs.
2. Occult sciences, spells and black magic. *Rodiyas* were traditionally known for their mastery of black magic and their widely feared ability to cast spells on others.
3. A knowledge base relating to several arts and crafts.
4. Beggars' lore. Songs that attract sympathy and contributions from the donors.

Their traditional arts and crafts included the following:

1. Manufacture of string hopper trays (*inidappa tati*), coconut milk strainer (*kirigotta*) and winnowing instrument (*kulla*).
2. Collection and processing of cane from the wild for making cane products.
3. Making of drums of various kinds for the use of Kandyan drummers and dancers and various other people who use drums.
4. Making of brooms (*kosu*) and ground sweeping instruments (*idal*) using coconut fibre and coconut spines (*iratu*).
5. Playing (turning) of rabanas (*raban karakavima*) seen as a female artistic skill
6. Setting of traps for wild animals.
7. Catching and training of monkeys and snakes for performances.

Most of these traditional arts and crafts of the *Rodiyas* are on the decline due to a combination of factors, including difficulty of obtaining raw material, competition from cheaper mass produced items in the market, reluctance on the part of the youth to continue these crafts mainly for status and income reasons and continuing social stigma against the *Rodiya* caste. Only older men and women continue some of the crafts. For instance in the village of Manawa out of 160 households only about 30 continued traditional crafts as one of the livelihoods in the households.

There is, however, an interesting development of charms, ritual protection and occult practices (*yantra mantra gurukam*) in some of the *Rodiya* villages. One feature of this explicit claim of hereditary occult knowledge is the use of mass media advertisements to attract customers, openly identifying the practitioners as *hulavali charmers* in an unprecedented trend towards ownership of this traditional knowledge by the relevant caste. The village of Kurgandeniya in Menikhinna has become famous for these charms and occult practices, with some making substantial fortunes from this process. The reasons for the rise of this occult economy (Cameroff and Cameroff 1999: 283) largely relate to insecurities generated by the process of globalisation whereby many Sri Lankans go abroad for work and their family members in Sri Lanka face uncertainties about their family members abroad (Silva 2011: 108). Another domain where the services of occult practitioners are sought is family problems and the desire to win the hearts of current or potential lovers.

There are also some other developments in *Rodiya* communities which indicate some continuity with their traditional skills and knowledge base. For instance, long distance trade in some commodities such as mattresses, mats and carpets and collection of recyclable scrap material including metal, plastics and bottles have become important and profitable activities for some entrepreneurs in these communities. Some such entrepreneurs have become very big operators owning multiple trucks used in this business. Even though these are successful adaptations to the new market economy it appears that the members of the *Rodiya* caste have had a head start in these operations because of their background in begging, collection of garbage and scrap material as part of their cultural and occupational heritages.

The *Rodiya* people tend to consider their occult practices, Ratanavali story, and the art of turning raban as a cultural expression of their identity. Most of them do not want to identify with begging as part of their traditional occupations due to the low dignity it conveys. On the other hand, it is interesting that occult knowledge and practices have been identified and promoted as heritage and a source of empowerment of the *Rodiya* caste in a society where caste is otherwise rarely mentioned in public.

### ***Kinnara Caste***

Traditional knowledge of *Kinnara* caste consists of folklore about the origin of caste, traditional designs in making of artistic mats and knowledge relating to making of ropes using raw materials collected in the jungle. The Kinnarayas are famous for making artistic Dumbara mats (*kalalaya*) and wall hangings using the refined fiber extracted from a locally available hemp called *hana* or *niyanda* (*Sansevieria zelanica*). As evident in the village of Kalasirigama, the older generation continue mat making for markets in Kandy. Part of their traditional knowledge has already disappeared due to the demise of old craft persons. Some of the positive influences that have helped maintain their traditional craft are as follows:

1. The opening of a new market for tourists.
2. The establishment of a government marketing channel through Laksala and a number of private sector agencies purchasing their products.
3. The establishment of a new housing scheme (Udagama) by the government in Kalasirigama for the persons engaged in traditional craft making which has made it easy for them to supply their products to Kandy.

Much of the craft knowledge however has declined due to the younger generations not taking up this craft occupation. In Kalasirigama it was noted that they had nearly 150 motifs used in mat weaving and by now they are reduced to only a handful of motifs due to the disappearance of some of the master craftsmen. Lack and difficulty of securing raw materials for this craft has also posed problems about continuing the craft of weaving. Another problem is competition from cheaper products (mats and carpets) from other countries. The craft persons also mentioned that they do not get paid until their products are sold in Laksala and other outlets. Hence the producers have to wait for long periods in order to get paid for their products.

### **Conclusion**

A considerable section of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions in Sri Lanka is held by some of the lowest castes in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. Traditionally this knowledge was transmitted orally from within each caste, each caste thus holding a significant part of the traditional knowledge in

society. The sustainability of this system of traditional knowledge preservation has run into serious problems due to erosion of the caste system, younger generations not taking up the relevant arts and crafts and difficulties in obtaining required raw materials and increased competition from mass products available locally.

These elements of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions are encountering multiple problems due to external threats such as globalisation and related push of cultural homogenization and increased competition from mass production of artifacts on the one hand and internal problems such as moving away from these crafts and cultural expressions by young generations in the relevant castes primarily due to status considerations on the other. In spite of these difficulties, some of the traditional arts and crafts such as mat making, Kandyan dance and cane products have achieved a degree of momentum and revival due to tourism and state patronage. Similarly some of the traditional art forms have achieved a new lease of life due to electronic media, political patronage and integration with educational and training programmes. Also increased popularity of caste specific occult knowledge in the wake of globalisation, increased mobility of people and rapid social change reveal some new adaptations of traditional knowledge to suit new circumstances. This in turn calls for a systematic assessment of the determinants of preservation and conservation of traditional knowledge systems in Sri Lanka.

The study found that while some traditional arts and crafts have gradually declined due to the adverse impact of globalisation and the low dignity conferred to hereditary practitioners of these arts and crafts, other arts, crafts and traditional cultural expressions have displayed a considerable revival through electronic and printed media, state patronage and new opportunities offered by global market forces. In conclusion the paper argues for a policy framework that is equally sensitive to cultural dynamics of the craft communities and, at the same time, opportunities and openings offered by the market forces and the globalisation processes.

Some unresolved policy issues relating to preservation of traditional knowledge include how far the preservation of this knowledge must be limited to traditional bearers of such knowledge, how to integrate such knowledge with educational curricula in schools, technical colleges, art schools and universities and how to promote the dignity and honour of the members of the lowest castes

who possess this knowledge while making efforts to preserve their cultural heritages and what role the state should play in promoting and sustaining cultural heritages and knowledge systems dispersed in various population groups.

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